

TEUTON AND BRITON—A YEAR'S HISTORY

How the Successors of the Original "Contemptibles" Learned the Art of Modern War—The Somme as a Training School

By FRANK H. SIMONDS

Author of "The Great War," "They Shall Not Pass"

It is now nearly three years since the German Emperor exhorted his troops to "the contemptible little British army." Of that British army it is doubtful if more than 10 per cent remain in the ranks and almost 50 per cent are dead. Its place has been taken by the new British army, whose numbers are reckoned in hundreds of thousands, not in hundreds, and the time has perhaps come when one may profitably review the history of the achievements of this new British army in the year in which it has actually been at work.

On the first day of July, 1916, the new British army made its attack on the battlefield of the Somme. It was in the main a green army, facing a veteran force. It was commanded by officers who were only in rare instances soldiers by profession, and it was made up almost exclusively of men who had never carried a musket before the outbreak of the Great War. It was a creation of the war and the expression of a democracy.

On the first of July, 1916, no man, whatever his faith, could say with knowledge what this British army would accomplish in the face of a veteran German force, organized by a military system of many years standing. The first day of the Battle of the Somme was one of the greatest experiments in military history.

The result of that first day redounded to the credit, the courage, the devotion and the spirit of sacrifice of the new British army. Progress unprecedented in Western warfare was made, although far greater success attended the French than the British armies on this day.

Still Lacking in Training

The British army did not pierce the German lines. Over half the front they were, in fact, held up, repulsed with bloody losses, driven back to their trenches. From Gommecourt to Thiepval the German line held and was to hold for many weeks to come. Eastward of Thiepval, as far as the French line near the Somme, material progress was made. The first line was taken, thousands of prisoners and many guns were brought in, and the new British army made its first considerable step forward. I have been told by British officers that the casualty list of that day of the British was 50,000. At all events, the losses were terrific. There was lacking that skill, that coordination between artillery and infantry, only to be expected in a seasoned army. Precisely the faults that were to be anticipated were disclosed. The British army did better than anybody who knew it thought it would do, but it showed itself still lacking in training.

From the first of July to November in that period of time it advanced four or five miles on a wide front. It took 38,000 German prisoners; it battered in the German lines and created new salients which imperiled the whole German front. One might examine progressively the casualty lists of the various attacks and discover thereby how the British army learned its job. On the first of July one brigade of four thousand men attacked without sufficient artillery preparation. It lost nineteen hundred men killed, eighteen hundred men wounded and brought back three hundred men. In the closing days of the Somme another brigade attacked, suffered four hundred casualties, buried nine hundred Germans and brought back eighteen hundred prisoners.

The Battle of the Somme was the training school of the British army. When it began the British army was great only in numbers, in spirit and in mechanical resources. When it was over there was demonstrated a material and a moral superiority. The German army had been put entirely on the defensive. There were no longer counter attacks. The German artillery, unaided by aeroplanes, because the British had captured control of the air, shot into the blue. The prisoners who were captured complained bitterly of lack of artillery support and of the failure of their aeroplanes. In four short months the new British army wrested the moral ascendancy on the battlefield from the German. The British carried all the positions that they attacked up to the moment when the close of the fighting season terminated operations.

Effect of the Somme

The consequences of the progress were revealed a few months later, when the German army, in advance of the campaign of 1917, withdrew over a wide front, evacuating nearly a thousand square miles of French territory. They left because they could not continue to hold the positions in which they stood. They could not continue to hold those positions because British progress had imperiled them.

The story of the Battle of the Somme is the story of a new army, a green army. It is the story of a military education achieved under fire at great cost in life. It is the story of a lesson learned. The

last offensive of the Somme series, which took Beaumont Hamel, attracted attention all over the world as the first clear indication that the British high command and staff had learned modern war. Even then military opinion questioned whether the British staff could rival the achievement unfolded by the French in the two attacks on Verdun in October and December.

The answer to this question was made in April of the present year. At that time the British army attacked again, but it was no longer a new army. There were no longer the old weaknesses of staff work which lost Loos and made Neuve Chapelle a shambles. There was no longer the failure of July 1 between Thiepval and Gommecourt. On the contrary, from the Souchez River to the Cojeul a great British army stepped forward and wrested from the Germans all its objectives. The Vimy Ridge, which had defied French efforts, which had baffled Foch in 1915, which was believed by the Germans to be impregnable, fell beneath the assaults of the Canadians, while to the southward, along the Scarpe, British battalions passed through four miles of German trenches and reached Monchy, far beyond. Twenty-one thousand prisoners, more than two hundred guns, many of them heavy, were the immediate prize of this attack. The moral and military superiority actually attained at the Somme was demonstrated at the Scarpe.

Arras Shows Progress

Whatever else might have been said at the time of the Battle of the Somme, it was no longer possible to doubt that in the Battle of Arras the Germans had been outgunned, outmanned, outfought and outgeneralled. The new British artillery had achieved mastery over the old German artillery. A German army had been surprised, swept off its feet. It had lost ground which it had been fortifying for nearly three years. It was able to avoid complete disaster only by repeating the sacrifice of the French in the first days of Verdun and bringing up its choicest troops to build a living wall while it could repair the breach in its dike.

In the history of the strife between the new British army and the German the Battle of Arras is the second stage. There was a third. From the days of October, 1914, the Ypres salient had been the Achilles heel of the British front. The ground lost in 1914 had placed the Germans on the high land from which they commanded the whole Ypres salient and from which they exacted a never ending toll of casualties. No offensive operations in this field could even be prepared without immediate warning to the Germans. Yet in the full view of the German army the British prepared an offensive on the ground. In plain sight of German observation and under the fire of German artillery they gathered their strength, they organized their stroke.

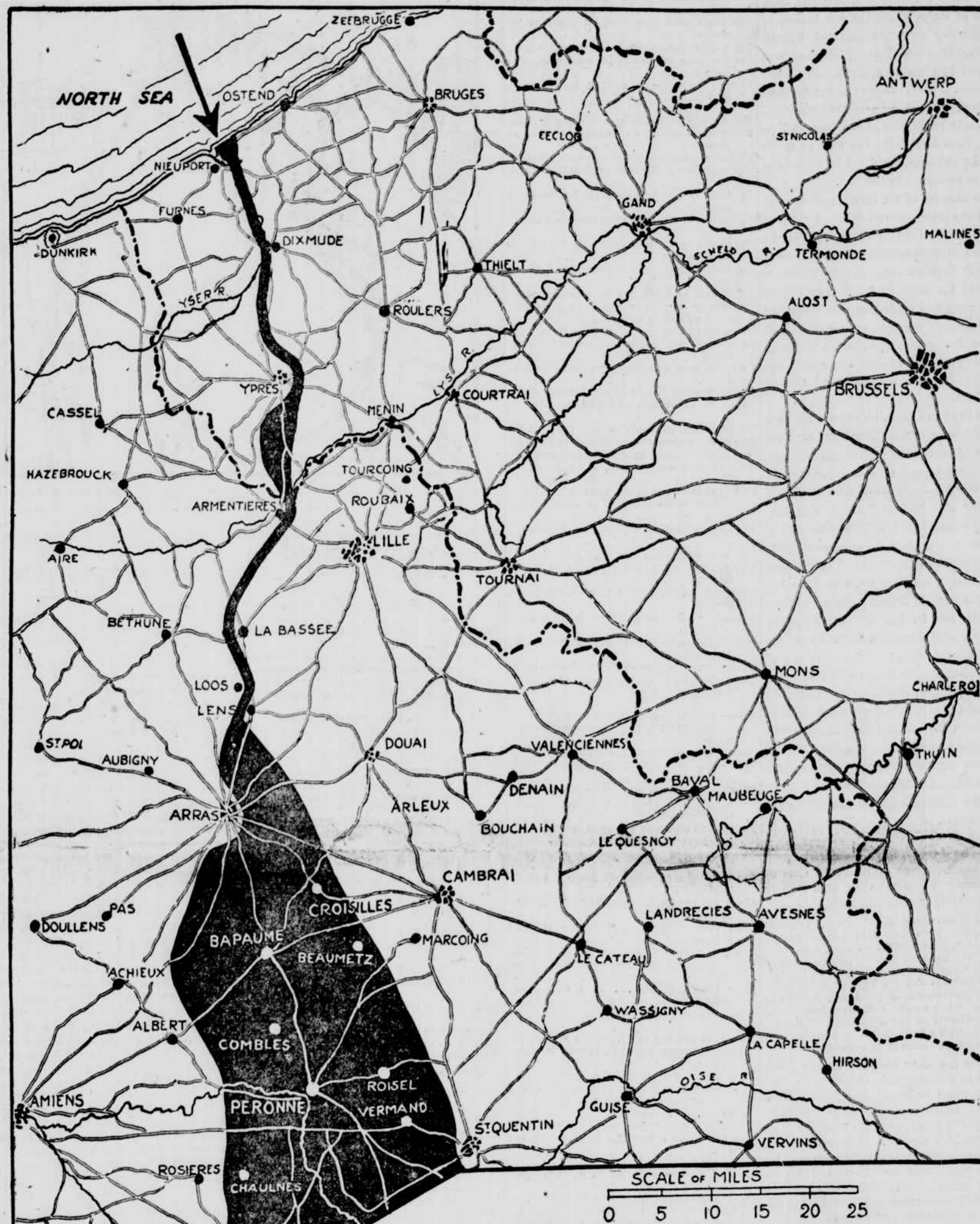
The third battle of Ypres represents the high water mark of British achievement, because in all respects the British were able, having directly challenged the Germans, to achieve their objectives without delay and at moderate cost. In a few hours the Germans were swept from the Messines Ridge. They were swept out of the villages of Wytschaete and Messines. They were driven down into the lowlands of the Lys. All the advantageous points won in the battle of October and November, 1914, were surrendered in a period of minutes. Seven thousand prisoners, many guns, much material, were left in British hands, and so completely successful was the attack that it was, as Mr. Belloe pointed out, forty hours before the Germans were able to organize a counter attack, which was abortive.

A Year's Record

Looking backward now over the year that lies between the opening of the Battle of the Somme and the close of the third Ypres, we see certain facts. In that period of time the British have taken up ward of four hundred guns—a testimonial more eloquent than the capture of thirty-eight thousand prisoners at the Somme, twenty thousand prisoners at Arras or seven thousand prisoners at Ypres. They have driven the Germans back over a front in places twenty miles deep. They have mastered all the weapons which were in German hands when the war began and were unknown to the civilian army of Britain. More than this, each successive effort of the British army has been technically better in a military sense, more efficient and more successful than that which preceded it, and each has shown a newer and more complete mastery of the conditions, the weapons and the methods of contemporary warfare.

Such is the history of a year of conflict between the Briton and the Teuton. It can be shown on the map, as I have tried to show it, by an area of reconquered territory. It will be recounted in history in the story of three great victories—the Somme, Arras and Ypres—but the actual

A Year of British Advance



Solid black shows territory conquered by British army from July, 1916, to July, 1917. A small portion near the Somme was taken by the French during the Battle of the Somme.

The arrow points to the gain recently made by the Germans at the mouth of the Yser, which is also indicated in black. The thin black line shows present battle line.

achievement goes beyond the measurement which we can get here. Before this is over I believe that we shall have further and far more impressive evidence of the moral superiority which the British army has gained over the German. When I came back from the British army last spring my readers here will remember what I said about the moral supremacy which the British army felt it had, individually and collectively, over the Germans. This was before Arras and before the third battle of Ypres. It was based entirely upon the Somme. But what the moral exaltation of the British army after Arras and Ypres must be it is not difficult to estimate.

Now, in all that time, what has the German army accomplished against the British? What has it to set against the capture of more than seventy-five thousand German troops and more than four hundred guns? What has it to show beyond the fact that its line has not yet been pierced and that by retreating it has preserved the continuity of its line from Flanders to Switzerland? The answer is this: A few days ago two British battalions north of the Yser River, temporarily deprived of the support of a British fleet, were annihilated by a sudden German attack after their bridges had been cut behind them. The German official report claims the capture of 1,250 British, with a certain amount of material. This is the greatest German capture of the year against the British. It is the most considerable gain made by a German offensive

against the British, and it measured less than a mile in front and less than a quarter of a mile in depth. Up to this moment no British gun had been captured in more than two years, and no British force as a unit had been taken since the second Ypres. Here, after all, frankly recognizing the complete success of this particular German operation, is the measure of German offensive achievement in a year of terrific struggle.

Perhaps before this article reaches the reader's hand we shall have another British attack. Every sign points to it. Unless the conditions have entirely changed we shall see an attack more successful than those of the past, because each British attack has been more successful than its predecessor. That the British army can now break the German line with a sudden thrust seems to me unlikely rather than impossible. In the past year the British army has worn out the German more terrifically than any German had considered possible, and this is found, not in British comment, but in the captured reports of General Sixt von Arnim at the time of the Somme. Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig told me that between July and February the Germans had used one hundred and thirty-three and a half divisions on the Western front. The number has gone far beyond this now. In the furnace of the Somme all that was best in the German army was ground up, and after the Somme the German army has never displayed the same spirit in its conflicts with the British.

If we keep our eyes fixed on trench lines and accept the German formula that every engagement is a German victory which does not result in the piercing of the Ger-

man lines and the rupture of the German front, which does not result in a general retreat, we shall totally misunderstand what has taken place on the British front and some day will be bewildered by what does take place. The British army has demonstrated its superiority in all respects over the German. The extent of this superiority has not yet led to a Leipzig, to a Sedan, or to a Waterloo, but it has led to German defeats more destructive of German confidence in the ranks than any Napoleonic failure before Leipzig. The invincibility of the German army has been demonstrated to be a legend by the new army of Great Britain and her Dominions in one short year, and I believe firmly that if the war continues with unchanged conditions on the Western front for another year we shall see a German disaster comparable with that of Lee when he endeavored to hold too long to his trenches before Richmond. If the Germans again retreat to escape such a disaster the meaning will still be unescapable.

Triumph of the New Army

In British history the third battle of Ypres will rank with the first. The first was the success of a little army lacking in every mechanical weapon save only their rifles, outnumbered, outgunned, three to one, five to one. It was the story of an army which died on the spot, leaving a few survivors barely holding on. The third Ypres was the triumph of a new British army, possessing all the material devices of modern warfare and possessing technical efficiency in their use. It possessed all the qualities needed to demonstrate that England had arrived and passed her foe, whose chief, three years before, had sneered at "the contemptible little British army."

Turning now to the Russian front, there have been interesting incidents since I closed my review of last week, without any great or decisive change. As I closed my article of last week, it will be recalled that I commented upon the success of the Russians south of the Dniester and in the direction of Halicz. This was on July 9. During the next four days this Russian success grew and spread, until it seemed to be a grave menace to the whole German position in Galicia between the Stry and the Carpathians.

On this front the situation was as follows: The Austro-German army was standing in front of Lemberg and some forty miles to the eastward of the town. Its northern flank rested upon the Stry River, its centre was pushed forward along the Zlota Lipa River, its southern flank curved back from the Zlota Lipa River to a point just east and north of the mouth of the Gnila Lipa River, which enters the Dniester opposite Halicz. Southward of the Dniester the Austro-German army stood at the Bystritsa River, straight southward to the Carpathian Mountains. The only town of importance in this region was the small city of Stanislaw, which had been captured by the Russians last December, and this marked the extreme southern point of their advance in their campaign of last year.

The two armies of the Central Powers standing north and south of the Dniester made contact not far from the point where the Gnila Lipa River enters the Dniester, and the Russian attack, moving north and west out of Stanislaw, forced the passage of the Bystritsa River

Several Possibilities of the Recent Advance on Russian Front

Copyright 1917—The Tribune Association

and thrust a wedge between these two armies, taking Halicz and reaching and capturing Kalusz, about twenty miles west of Stanislaw, and the headquarters of the Austrian army south of the Dniester.

When the Austrian army lost the line of the Bystritsa the question was immediately posed whether it could retreat and hold the Lomnica line. Like the Bystritsa River this stream rises in the Carpathians and flows north, entering the Dniester five or ten miles west of the Bystritsa. Either of these streams supplies a satisfactory line for extending the Austro-German position south of the Dniester to the Carpathians. But if the Russians succeeded in passing both the river crossings they would then have no considerable natural obstacles in their pathway all the way to Stry, thirty miles to the west, and if Stry should fall the fate of Lemberg would be sealed.

Early Russian Success

In the first dash of the Russians they passed the Lomnica River and occupied a number of towns west of the river, as well as Halicz to the eastward; and from Halicz they passed to the north bank of the Dniester, west of the Gnila Lipa. In this position they threatened the whole Gnila Lipa line north of the Dniester and the whole Lomnica line south of it. They interposed a wedge between the two armies of the Central Powers, and the position of each of these armies became dangerous. Unless the Russians could now be checked a general and sweeping change on the Eastern front was imminent.

The taking of Kalusz was announced on Saturday. On Sunday the Russians were still pushing forward south of Kalusz and were clearing the eastern bank of the Lomnica River and seizing the crossings.

But then there came a change. First we had reports of heavy rain which slowed down the Russian advance, and later on Tuesday came the announcement that the Germans had retaken the town of Kalusz, and that the Russians had retired behind the Lomnica line.

This is the situation which exists at the moment these lines are written. If the Austro-German counter offensive shall now make good the line of the Lomnica, it is plain that the Russian offensive will come to a dead halt, and that it will amount to a considerable, but only local, success. The Russian official statement announces that more than 36,000 prisoners and many guns have been taken since the general offensive of July 2 began. A considerable strip of territory between Bystritsa and the Lomnica River has been taken and a number of small towns have likewise been occupied.

If the Drive Is Ended

But all this is of minor consequence if the Russian drive is over. Then it will remain true, as I said last week, that the moral rather than the military value of the new Russian offensive will be the important thing. We have now to wait and see whether the Russians can bring up fresh munitions and new reserves and renew the attack south of the Dniester or whether they will now have to resign the offensive for the time being. Before these lines reach the reader the facts should be clear. If the Russians are still held up east of the Lomnica it is fair to conclude that the Russian offensive south of the Dniester is over for the time being and that the Germans have succeeded again, as they succeeded along the Stokhod last year, in beating down a Russian drive which threatened to dislocate the whole front from the Pripet Marshes to the Carpathians.

Any further considerable advance of the Russians west of the Lomnica River will compel the Austrians and the Germans north of the Dniester to retire behind the Gnila Lipa line. If this line is turned there is no good defensive position east of Lemberg, and it seems inevitable that the Austro-Germans will have to evacuate the capital of Galicia again; but it must be remembered that such an evacuation would be the greatest moral disaster for the Germans since Verdun. They are bound to bend every nerve and energy to avert it, and unless they have reached the cracking point it is likely that their superior lines of transportation and organization will enable them to ward off the blow. Conceivably the Russians will now try elsewhere, as they struck at the Bystritsa line after they had been checked north of the Dniester in the first week of July, but much depends now on the domestic affairs of Russia. Above all, it is again necessary to advise against too great optimism and too great hope so far as the Russian offensive is concerned. It has done more than anybody had a right to expect, but it has not achieved a decisive or more than a local success so far, and it has not in any degree approximated Brusiloff's success of last year, when he broke the Austrian line in Volhynia, near Olyka, and subsequently captured Dubno and Lutsk and came within an ace of capturing Kovel.